



The Real of the Virus

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Abstract:

This article explores how the need for the philosophical understanding of the current situation due to the Pandemic. Covid-19 as a matter of objective and social fact tends to align along with our existential attitudes, beliefs regarding the seriousness of the Covid-19 pandemic and our Ideological commitments. Decisions about the measures and obligations we have adopted such as social distancing, wearing masks rely in part on how one evaluates the nature of the virus. In this article I investigate the relationship between one's Ideology developed through beliefs, Ideologies and Covid-19 oriented stances. Furthermore, this article explores the virus is much more than a natural intrusion into the human world. It reveals our interconnectivity, as being-in-the-world, that the virus is not just an external intrusion disrupting our world. Taking the Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective on the master signifier and the Real as a traumatic intrusion into our life world, Covid-19 is an Event (Badiou), produced by our social, technological, environment ecosystem. This article concludes by our need to rethink our global economy relying on the market mechanism and our need to address the truth of our situation.

Keywords: Covid-19, Ideology, Event.

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Introduction:

The Pandemic seems to connote to the populist that the time for philosophy is over; who cares about learning metaphysics and how to live when science could almost solve all the problems in the world. These critics have missed out a very crucial point. The ongoing pandemic is not only about the immense economic and social problems, it has become more and more a real conflict of our global vision about society. The crisis has clearly shown our own different existential approaches, while there is a division between maskers and anti-maskers, who believe the virus is an ideology propagated by the rulers for social control and those who do not and so on. This conflict in belief is precisely existential, one which cannot be simply scoffed at, rather it ultimately depends on one's basic stance towards being human. The conflict is also based on certain political stance, a Utilitarian view ready to sacrifice the minority in order to save lives of the majority, a Libertarian view who would reject any coercive regime that encroaches the

individual freedom, or even the religious or spiritualist view who think that the Pandemic is a punishment from God or Nature for going against order. The present situation forces us towards a new need for understanding and developing an attitude, a philosophical one.

Ideology and the Virus:

It was Li Wenliang, an ophthalmologist, who whistle-blowed the danger of the outbreak and posted his story on Weibo from a hospital bed a month after sending out his initial warning.² Nevertheless the authorities took him to the police station instead for "spreading false rumours" and "disrupting social order". A Hong Kong-based journalist Verna Yu commented, "If China valued free speech, there would be no coronavirus crisis. Unless Chinese citizens' freedom of speech and other basic rights are respected, such crises will only happen again . . . Human rights in China may appear to have little to do with the rest of the world but as we have seen in this crisis, disaster could occur when China thwarts the freedoms of its citizens.

² <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-51403795>

Surely it is time the international community takes this issue more seriously.”³ Besides the authoritarian functioning of the Chinese state, the ongoing epidemic has also triggered a network of ideological viruses in our societies such as conspiracy theories, fake news and of course racism. First, there was a denial of the epidemic in a form of temporality or will subside soon like that of the SARS, then comes the blame and anger usually in the form of racism-- “China-virus or Corona-jihad”, then comes the conspirators aspect in the form of a biological weapon developed in Wuhan lab⁴. The virus is real but the contagion is not without Ideology. Any form of Pandemic carries a subset of ideological viruses which lies dormant in our modern society. A Foucauldian would assume that there is a close semblance of the measures taken by various state government apropos to the Covid-19 with that of the seventeenth century as Foucault notes: “During the seventeenth century pandemic, a severe norm of spatial

distancing was evoked, towns and districts were close down. Leaving the town and merely strolling out were prohibited. Inspections and gaze functions ceaselessly. The civilians are prompted absolute obedience to the newly enacted laws and the bodies of militia were deployed to ensure the abidance of the regulation. The syndics would stop at every house, he calls each of them by their names; in this way he would know ‘whether the sick or dead are concealed’. Individuals living or dead are observed at every point, located and examined.”⁵ Furthermore, the plague is met by a form of order that is a compact model for exercising disciplinary power and rulers dreamt of such a state. Giorgio Agamben, being a Foucauldian, responded to the state’s decision to declare a ‘state of emergency’ by imposing various bans as a means to make docile bodies. Agamben speaks of human life reduced to ‘naked life’ or ‘bare life’, a concept theorized in

³<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/08/if-china-valued-free-speech-there-would-be-no-coronavirus-crisis>.

⁴<https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/the-superspreaders-behind-top-covid-19-conspiracy-theories/article33840009.ece>.

⁵ <https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/coronavirus-and-philosophers/>.

Agamben's Homo Saucer.⁶ In the state of emergency, the individual's rights can be diminished in the process of the government taking hold over an individual's rights due to extension of power. Such arrays of measures subtracted the individual squarely to cling to mere 'naked life', thereby abolishing the very humane and the social. It is crucial to note here that neither Foucault nor Agamben thought the plague and Covid-19 is a mere hoax, rather they are more focused on the measures taken by the government and such reflections are fundamental to understand the political effect of the past, present and future.

Covid-19 and the Event:

The narrative of Covid-19 has been depicted generally by the political and the media as an inconsistent or wild nature inflicting a trauma upon humanity. Billions of dollars were funded by the Capitalist to investigate and search for the panacea for overcoming it. However, the virus is nature itself, like the Australian forest fires, it is not external or outside trauma

haunting humanity, but it is part of the set of complex networks 'nature-humanity-technology' acting together, an actant. Covid-19 is an event, an event according to Actor-Network theorist occurs when the non-human actants and humans form a stable network⁷. Covid-19 evolved within the ecosystem consisting of human and animals, marketplaces and viruses, urban and social networks and globalisation. Collectively our interaction with the non-human actants became viable enough for enabling the pandemic to occur and spread. These networks of social interaction and activity are certainly which viruses would thrive and mutate. The more we are connected, even a local disaster can disrupt a whole mechanism of the function, just as a human body. Such an event would go unnoticed a century ago. This is a paradox at work here: technological development makes us more connected, makes us more independent from nature but at the same time much more dependent on nature's whims.

⁶ <https://thewire.in/society/coronavirus-of-our-discontents>.

⁷ For non-human actants and human actors see Bruno Latour (2005).

<https://ksangmin.wordpress.com/2009/07/08/bruno-latour-the-pasteurization-of-france/>.

The virus is just a sub-layer of life, non-living, idiotic but that can trigger a global fear and a catastrophe. Covid-19 is not only a virus going viral. The Covid-19, a fact of our social reality is also fused with real and fantasy, a signifier. According to the Psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, fantasy supports the frame of what we experience as reality.⁸ Therefore, our whole frame of perception and reaction of the epidemic is sustained by multitudes of fantasies, how each individual's perception of the real of the virus and its social impact, etc, may differ. The virus, as a signifier, is a master signifier. A tyrannical form of signifier because it's dominating appearance is such that nothing else is allowed to think about, it is a tyrant of our thoughts. A master signifier unleashing a chain of signifiers, a signifier, with facts and fictions going viral, political and social anxieties going viral, news of deaths and recoveries going viral, and narratives and stories going viral. No wonder the social fact that the virus brought halt to

the world yet it is also a fact that many people are also at the same time dying of other diseases, hunger, war and pollution.

Covid-19 as an 'Event' is a short-circuit, a disruption of our normal smooth functioning life-worlds and exposes our fragility in the face of even some almost non-living matter like the Virus. It is a traumatic encounter with the (Lacanian) Real⁹ in our world of fantasy, which disturbs our coherency. The Real in psychoanalytic terms is a sur-plus of reality, a traumatic event encountered which escapes language and cannot capture it. It is beyond knowing but it is a Truth that makes its appearance in an unsymbolisable sense and cannot be withdrawn from it. The event encountered is similar to that of the Badiouan 'Event', an 'Event' Alain Badiou writes is 'a multiple which basically does not make sense according to the rules of the situation'¹⁰. Furthermore, a multiple is also a subset of other multiples and so on. Covid-19 is such an Event, a multiple, there is no single cause

⁸ Ormrod J.S. (2014) Fantasy in Lacanian Theory. In: Fantasy and Social Movements. Studies in the Psychosocial Series. Palgrave Macmillan, London.
https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137348173_4.

⁹ For the Lacanian concept of the Real see https://nosubject.com/Jacques_Lacan:Real.

¹⁰ Alain Badiou (2007).

whether it is Capitalism, climate change, China or conspiracy, that is able to properly explain it entirely. Nor can it be multitudes of causes, a result of contingent over-determination of processes. It is something unexpectedly emergent, arising from the collective functioning of a system, it does not belong to the elements of the system but have a potentiality lying dormant within the system itself. In set-theoretical terms, it is the subset within a set, it does not belong to the set(system) but is included in it. Therefore, the pandemic is about the contradiction between the binaries of human versus the virus, human versus nature, because it is an Event produce by the interconnected ecosystem.

What needs to be done?

Our situation proposes urgent demands which require an urgent response. Primarily, focus is still too much based on checking the statistics of Covid-19 on the number of infected, dead and recovery. The fascination of statistics automatically leads to the forgetting of the fact that many more people are dying of poverty, health issues, pollution, war and domestic violence as if when we get rid of the

viral infection society will run a normal course and troubles will disappear. This sort of optimism is an illusion at its best and we must focus more on the issue of other problems which exposes a further worst threat such as global warming and the likes. The pandemic disturbs the functioning of our Markets and our economic systems are panicking. This also exposes our sole reliance on the market mechanisms and it indeed signals the urgent need for a reformulation of the global economy which will not be solely based at the mercy of market mechanism.

It is also a crucial time for us to take simple fact seriously as announced by the Director General of the World Health Organization, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus:

"The greatest threat we face now is not the virus itself. Rather, it's the lack of leadership and solidarity at the global and national levels. We cannot defeat this pandemic as a divided world. The COVID-19 pandemic is a test of global solidarity and global leadership. The virus thrives on

division, but is thwarted when we unite."¹¹

To take this statement seriously, we have to thwart and take into account divisions at the level of international divisions, class, caste and creed divisions. It is not difficult to imagine that the epidemic will spread rapidly among people living in poverty than the rich. Certain people who are economically weaker have to make a forced choice between not only starvation and rising life but also having to bear responsibility for the possible spread. We have to acknowledge not only the doctors and nurses working on the frontline, but also those industrial workers who are either exploited or overworked since their work is more clandestine and people do not know the harsh condition of their work environment especially during this pandemic. It will be impossible to contain the viral pandemic without also containing the pandemic of poverty.

In order to successfully contain the virus that threatens our lives, our predominant stance (whatsoever stance we possess) should not be

scepticism or 'the will-not-to-know' but that of the 'will-to-know', to know that working of the Covid-19 so as to contain it. The states are much more responsible now than before, a need for strong governing authorities is needed along with the collective local participation from the individuals. We must follow Immanuel Kant's line of reasoning in "What is Enlightenment" regarding the law of the state: "Obey, but think, maintain the freedom of thought!". We must bravely use our 'public use of reason'.

¹¹<https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-opening-remarks-at-the-member-state-briefing->

[on-the-covid-19-pandemic-evaluation---9-july-2020.](https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-opening-remarks-at-the-member-state-briefing-)

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